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How Healthy Is Your Home?

We all know how important diet and exercise are for our health. Did you know that the condition of your home can have a big impact on your health, too?

Apparently, many of us do. In a 2009 survey, the National Center for Healthy Housing found that a majority of respondents realized that the way their home was built and maintained could lead to serious health problems, including asthma, allergies, lead poisoning, cancer, and injuries.

Yet many of those same people had not taken simple and inexpensive steps to create a safe and healthy home environment for themselves and their families. In fact, more than two-thirds admitted that they lived in a house with at least one major health risk.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) teamed up to develop seven principles for making your home a healthier place to live. Here they are, along with some practical ways to incorporate them into your life:

1. Keep your home dry. Damp houses provide a nurturing environment for mites, rodents, and molds, all of which are associated with asthma.

- Clean and repair gutters and downspouts to guide water away from your home's foundation.
- Regularly check, and repair if needed, all plumbing fixtures and appliances for leaks (dishwasher, refrigerator, sinks, hot water heater, toilet, bath, and shower).
- Repair water damage in walls and ceilings to reduce mold growth.
- Make sure floor drains are clear and working. Unused drains can allow sewer odors into your home.

2. Keep your home clean: Clean homes help reduce pest infestations and exposure to contaminants.

- Place a mat inside and outside every door that leads outside.
- Use non-toxic cleaning supplies.
- Dust regularly.
- Clean the dryer vent, range hood screen, refrigerator drip pan, and exhaust fans.
- Clean and tune furnaces, hot water heaters, ovens, and air conditioning coils.

3. Keep your home pest-free: Recent studies show a cause-and-effect relationship between exposure to mice and cockroaches and asthma episodes in children. But be wary of using pesticides. Many can be harmful, and inappropriate treatment with them can make health problems even worse.

- Check for signs of rodents, bats, and other pests, which may carry diseases like rabies or hantavirus.
- Keep pests out by filling cracks and crevices with copper mesh, expanding foam, cement, or caulk.
- To remove pests, hire professionals who practice integrated pest management (IPM), which offers safer and usually less costly, common-sense ways to manage them.
- Keep sealable covers on trash cans to keep rodents and other pests out.

4. Keep your home safe: Most injuries among children and the elderly occur in the home. Falls are the most frequent cause, followed by injuries from objects in the home, burns, and poisonings.

- Install nightlights to help prevent falls.
- Install non-slip pads under carpets.
- Place a smoke detector on each level of your home.
- Place a carbon monoxide detector on each floor and outside sleeping areas.
- Set your water heater at 120 degrees.
- Place grab bars near baths and showers.
- Repair or replace damaged electrical cords and outlets.

5. Keep your home contaminant-free: Chemical exposures include lead, radon, pesticides, volatile organic compounds, and tobacco smoke. Exposures to asbestos particles, radon gas, carbon monoxide, and second-hand tobacco smoke are far higher indoors than out.

- Don't allow smoking in your home.
- Install wire shelving to prevent dust collection and avoid off-gassing from particle board.
- Test for radon in the lowest level of your home to prevent lung cancer, and hire a professional to install a radon mitigation system if necessary. For more information on radon, visit the website of the State Radon Office at www.mt-radon.info.
- Look for peeling paint. Deteriorated lead-based paint in homes built before 1978 is the primary cause of lead poisoning, which affects some 240,000 U.S. children. For more information, contact the health department's Lead Education and Abatement Program, 457-8583.

6. Keep your home ventilated: Studies show that increasing the fresh air supply in a home improves respiratory health.

- Install exhaust fans in bathrooms and over the range to reduce moisture and contaminants. Make sure these appliances are vented to the outside.

7. Keep your home maintained: Poorly maintained homes are at risk for many of the problems mentioned above.

- Repair cracks and holes in your foundation to keep pests and moisture out.
- Replace furnace filters regularly. The National Center for Healthy Housing recommends every 4 months.
- Repair broken and cracked windows.
- Check shingles to make sure your roof is in good condition.
- Pump out your septic tank every 3-5 years. Contact the health department's Septic System Maintenance Program for more information, 447-8385.

For more information:

- "Help Yourself to a Healthy Home," a 56-page guide produced by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, www.hud.gov/offices/lead/library/hhi/HYHH_Booklet.pdf
- National Center for Healthy Housing, www.nchh.org